

The fate of a city

Sheth Jerjis

Editor's note: As language is invariably tied up in debates over place and identity, the article has retained the Turkish transliteration of the city's name, Kerkuk.

It is beyond doubt that the ongoing conflict in Iraq is in large part one of competing economic interests. Iraq is home to the world's second largest proven reserves of [oil](#), and new exploration will likely raise Iraq's reserves to more than 200 billion barrels of high-grade crude, which is cheap to produce. [Kerkuk](#) is a region with 10 billion barrels of these oil reserves.

As a result of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, we now have a country on the verge of destruction, with about one million dead, millions displaced, and an administration that has all but collapsed, unable to provide even basic services for its people.

Sheth Jerjis is Chairman of the [Iraqi Turkmen Human Rights Research Foundation](#) based in the Netherlands. Kurdish political actors are almost the only supporters of occupation in the region. US officials have therefore been quite obliging in cooperating on issues such as the incorporation of Kerkuk, the wealth of which is crucial to the viability of a so-called Kurdistan that lacks economic resources. Kurdish control and administration of the Kerkuk region has consequently received absolute backing from the occupier, and has, along with other factors, marginalised the influence and voice of Iraq's Turkmen communities.

The Turkmen character of the city of Kerkuk is beyond dispute. Almost no [reliable reference](#) suggests Kerkuk city has ever had a Kurdish majority, with the majority of credible sources proving the largely [Turkmen nature of the city](#). Regarding the demography of the rest of Kerkuk province, sources arguing for a long-standing Kurdish majority are similarly dubious.

The region of Kerkuk has been occupied by US troops and Kurdish *peshmerga*. As happened elsewhere in Iraq, most government buildings were attacked, looted, and eventually burned. Militant *peshmergas* were behind such attacks in Turkmen areas. During the sacking in Kerkuk, the city's [Land and Population Registry Offices](#), as well as valuable census data, were burned and robbed.

The first [Kerkuk City Council](#), which was instituted by the occupying forces, granted a majority of seats to Kurds and Christians. The subsequent elections in Kerkuk were thereby conducted under a substantially Kurdish administration, police force, and security service. The election process was in countless

respects [flawed](#), with an estimated 228,000 [irregular votes](#). As a result of these elections however, Kurdish political actors extended their control over the City Council and other decision-making mechanisms, marginalising in the process both Turkmen and the Arab communities. A failure to investigate and condemn electoral irregularities has resulted in an atmosphere of mistrust, fuelling rather than calming tensions in the city.

At present almost all major posts in Kerkuk are held by Kurdish actors: the Governor and his Deputy, the Head of City Council and his Deputy, the Mayor, Chiefs of Kerkuk's municipalities, as well as the Police, security, military offices and 80% of the directors of governmental offices. Local administration has also been expanded, with the staff of governmental offices almost doubled, but almost all new appointees have been Kurdish.

More than [half a million Kurds](#) have been brought to Kerkuk. These people were [installed](#) in hundreds of governmental offices, huge complexes of Iraqi army buildings and in the houses of Arabs who left Kerkuk. By permission of the administration, thousands of houses were also built on municipality and Turkmen lands.

Municipal services and government projects are disproportionately devoted to the Kurdish regions of Kerkuk province. This has led to growing non-Kurdish unemployment throughout Kerkuk.

With the support of the pro-Kurdish US authorities, issues pertaining to Kerkuk were erroneously and unfairly entered into the permanent Iraqi constitution as part of a temporary article. [Article 58](#) of the Transitional Administrative Law, which hampered the annexation of Kerkuk to other regions, was removed during the drafting process of the constitution. Kurdish actors have successfully laid the groundwork for the absorption of the city ahead of the mandated [December referendum](#).

Article 140 in the [Iraqi constitution](#) outlines the following processes for the resolving of the Kerkuk Crisis: normalization, census and referendum. The normalization phase must include:

- the correction of the demographic distortions of the past:
 - This should include the reattachment of districts detached from Kerkuk Province in 1976. Two of the three are historically Turkmen; Kifri and Tuz Khurmatu.
 - Those forcefully deported should also be returned, with efforts to ensure that those returned have a legitimate claim to their presence

in the city and were genuinely deported under Ba'ath Party Arabisation policies.

- the creation of employment opportunities for the returnees, which is clearly impossible at the time being.
- the return of land confiscated by the Ba'ath Regime. The cases presented to the Kerkuk Property Claims Commission are predominantly Turkmen, numbering some 36,011.
- the resettlement of the approximately 270,000 Arabs who were brought into Kerkuk by Saddam Hussein's Arabification policy; this is an inordinately complex process.
- the determination of the demography and "citizenry" of Kerkuk with an eye on the census of 1957 and taking into account decades of manipulation, distortion and lack of reliable Kerkuk population and census registers.

The realisation of these processes is incredibly complicated and impractical. Additionally, the chief of the Kerkuk commission, which was instituted by the Prime Minister to carry out [Article 140](#), resigned soon after taking the post. A new chief remains to be appointed.

In today's Iraq, where all sorts of the human rights principles and boundaries of justice are violated, it is impossible to find a solution to the complicated crisis in Kerkuk. A census and referendum conducted at this time, under present conditions, will appear only to favour dominant Kurdish actors supported by the occupying forces, and will consequently lack the legitimacy needed to create real peace and stability.

The historical and geopolitical facts confirm the reality that Kerkuk province should be an independent administrative unit annexed to the capital and administered equally by the different communities of Kerkuk.